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Borderless

A Study of Violence against Women in Universities: Brazil, Portugal, and the U.K.

By Fafate Costa¹

Abstract

Brazilian university students report cases of rape *on campus*. In Portugal, young women experience humiliation and sexism when they enter university. In the UK, protests in an academic context put to the test policies for women. These narratives are present in a postdoctoral research project that will discuss violence against women in universities. One of the products resulting from this work will be a documentary that attempts to deal with the subjective perceptions of teachers, technicians, and students about gender violence in the Academy. Focusing on feminist epistemology that values experience as a way of knowing, this research has women as protagonists in both the denunciations and the execution of a video-activism on the subject.

Keywords: violence against women, sexual harassment, sexual violence, campus violence, Video-activism, university life, on campus.

Introduction

This is probably the most disturbing article I have written so far in my academic career. I delayed starting it, because the research is in motion. I do not write here, something finished, but about a boiling process of knowledge and, mainly, of the senses. Of course, I know that this is a common practice during thesis writing, when the researcher conducts the first discussions of the studies. But this is not the point: the difficulty is not to present analyses of an object in observation; instead, what worries me is to recognize that I am part of the researched environment, since the university is my work surrounding, and more than that, to a certain extent, I have had situations identical to those reported by my interviewees.

Let me go back to the beginning, then. My discomfort is prior to this writing. I joined the university as a teacher in 2014 after 20 years as a journalist on television. I have always worked in a sexist environment. This is a fact, a reflection of a patriarchal society like Brazil. But the naturalization of sexism is sometimes so great, as Bourdieu (2011) points out, that situations of violence against women are based on an order of male domination almost invisible to the victims themselves. And here, it is worth mentioning that psychological violence, as with all emotional damage that is caused by others, is very difficult for women to identify.

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My illusion was to think that in a space of the exchange of knowledge, such as the academic context, I would find better relations of equality, acceptance of diversity and, fundamentally, respect. Illusion. As early as 2016, the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ), where I teach, occupied the pages of all the newspapers, not for their scientific merits, but for three cases of rape occurring inside the *campus*.

Behold, it was not enough to overcome gender inequalities, and even more painfully, it was a question of facing sexual violence in its extreme gravity. Say it loudly: *The university is not a safe environment for women*.

Woman's Place?

As a journalist, I wrote countless reports regarding violent topics. In academic studies, my doctoral thesis was on violence against women and their representation in the media. The revolt against inequalities was always present in my speeches, but all of a sudden, all this seemed like it mattered little. It was a shock to confront the reality that in the countless times when I debated against the patriarchal system, perhaps I was just rampaging in my private universe—complaining with family members, protesting with friends, theorizing the problems in my intimate relationships. But was there anything I could do, socially, in favor of a more active feminism? Rural University students pointed the way.

“Rural is ours! And we need to feel safe here!” The exclamatory sentences were chanted by more than 500 university students during a protest at Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ), Brazil, in March 2016. The delay in institutional responses to serious reports of rape, raised by students, was the trigger for a week of demonstrations and the creation of a women's movement entitled “Tell Me When You Get There”.

The collective was born with the proposal of forming a chain of support and communication among university students, to be a space of sisterhood and listening to reports of rapes, harassment, various types of sexism, and so many forms of violence suffered. With a growing claim on *campus*, it became imperative that the University rethink its policy of protecting women.

I approached the “Tell Me When You Get There” movement. I accompanied some assemblies, I was invited to participate in discussion tables, and I noticed that there were still a small number of non-students involved in the actions organized by the collective. This absence of other servants of the same institution suggested something like: “this is a problem for the students”. Could it be that, even in the face of such serious abuses, the common slogan proclaimed on women's marches: “mess with one, mess with all” still didn't echo—effectively—for all?

I could not remain inert. The cause was (and is) mine, too. So, in 2017, I wrote a project that would be, at the beginning, the memory record of that movement located in Rural. I also considered it necessary to address the issue in a scientific way, proposing debates beyond student manifestos. I have heard students, teachers, and technicians, discuss the sexist culture in the academic context, which promotes a nefarious gender inequality. At every interview, the realization: the forms of violence are many!

Faced with a picture that indicated how much that space reproduced the same sexist and misogynist practices of society, I decided to expand the research making it a postdoctoral research project. There was born the project “Woman's place? A study of violence and gender inequality in the university context”. My proposal became the production of an audiovisual

documentary with the participants' subjective perceptions about violence against women in an academic context in Brazil and Portugal, in order to recognize historical, cultural, and patriarchal marks that persist beyond borders, silencing, sickening, and abusing women.

After having the research approved at the Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro, what I could not imagine was that upon arriving in Lisbon, I would go through typical bullying situations to curtailing my work. It should be emphasized that before leaving Brazil, I fulfilled all the bureaucratic and scientific procedures for joining a Portuguese university as a visiting researcher. Suddenly, the institution that had hosted my project became a labyrinthine space for the first three months and all the contacts did not respond, did not have an agenda, did not answer to the emails. The students' association, likewise, was also not accessible, postponing our meeting several times.

However, several Brazilian students in Lisbon reported cases of harassment in universities, so I predicted that it was a matter of time to listen to Portuguese university students too. Two researchers from the Women's Alternative and Response Union (UMAR) in Coimbra helped me along this path. By the middle of 2018 they had just compiled a report in which hundreds of students stated: the oldest university in the country was a setting for numerous sexist practices.

But when I was in the fifth month of investigations in Portugal, I was confronted with an attempt to silence this project. By an e-mail message sent by the supervisor who received me from the Interdisciplinary Center of Social Sciences of that institution, I was "advised" to change the subject: "There is no record of data on sexual harassment of students, nor any intervention programs on sexual harassment of students in this university (as possibly in other Portuguese universities). So it is suggested that you submit a new plan to the Scientific Council."

What would have motivated the university to prevent the progress of this research that had already been approved previously? If the argument was the absence of harassment records—would not this then be a topic to be addressed? I went looking for institutional answers, because I could not present a "new plan" without a scientifically based justification, especially after discussing with several students who claimed to have experienced abuse and sexist practices in Portuguese universities.

From then on I spent three months requesting a hearing from the Scientific Council, which deliberately did not attend to me. And I discovered by chance that the supervisor responsible for receiving me at the university had gone on sabbatical leave -during the academic recess - without even informing me. It was in this way, with an absolutely inappropriate treatment of a visiting foreign researcher, that an attempt was made in order to make me "disappear" scientifically by removing my institutional links.

I look back and see that this was Portugal's greatest contribution to my project. After all, the "advice" to change the research (that I restate, was previously accepted by the Interdisciplinary Center for Social Sciences) raised the hypothesis that this object of study came to the knowledge of someone with interests in preventing the debate on violence against women in the university context. I ask: who is interested in avoiding this subject?

But a complete change of course was to come. While attending an event on feminist research in Lisbon, I reported to the people present what was happening to me. It was then that I received the invitation to develop the research, "Woman's Place? ..." at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom.

It is at this moment that I am now working in the Centre for the Study of Women and Gender (CSWG) in the Department of Sociology of a university that does not shy away from

facing the debate on violence against women—because this violence exists and leaves uncontested marks of the need to urgently combat it.

And it was at the CSWG that I became aware of the 5th World Conference on Women's Studies (WCWS 2019) held in April in Bangkok, Thailand. I had the honor to present this research in that meeting, characterized by a privileged opportunity to share knowledge.

Feminist Video-activism

Although being a feminist woman in behavior, political decisions, attitudes and thoughts, I hadn't yet delved into feminist epistemology in those few years as an undergraduate teacher. Taking this survey to the UK brought me new gains. One of them is materialized in the writing of this article, once I understand that personal experience as knowledge for feminist studies.

During the meetings of the CSWG study group the hypothesis emerged to think about this documentary from the perspective of feminist activism. The stories—from students, technicians, and teachers—that I record in audio and video, weave a narrative that questions the sexist structures of the university context.

Following the understanding of Galán Zarzuelo (2012), the audiovisual product generated by the research has video-activism characteristics based on a content of denunciations and also by the methodology, since, as investigator, I am responsible for the entire process of technical production of it, from the capture of interviews and images, to the final edition.

Usually when talking about activism, a common image projected in the mind is that of moving cameras in the coverage of demonstrations and protests. But it is important to stress that activism is done in many ways, even in silence. Or, as is the case here, through testimonies that shed light on a cause that unites women around the world.

Violence without Borders

Violence against women is a historical stain on societies. Not accepting that violence is the first condition for the pursuit of gender equality. The data released by the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) in Brazil, in partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that 38% of women's violent deaths were caused by their partners².

In 2016, in Brazil, 4.645 women were murdered and more than 49.000 were raped, according to a survey by the Brazilian Public Security Forum³.

Denounced by feminist movements around the world for decades, the murder of women by gender violence has, in recent years has been named feminicide Brazil ranks fifth among 83 countries that kill women the most, according to the Map of Violence released in 2015⁴.

“However, in several contexts, impunity continues to be the rule in these cases, which is a source of concern. There remain significant challenges in tackling the unequal and discriminatory manner in which crimes against women and girls are

² The information is available at:

https://www.paho.org/bra/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5669:folha-informativa-violencia-contra-as-mulheres&Itemid=820

³ The data of the Violence Map in Brazil published in 2018, can be read here:

http://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/images/stories/PDFs/relatorio_institucional/180604_atlas_da_violencia_2018.pdf

⁴ And the Violence Map in Brazil can be downloaded in the following link: <https://oig.cepal.org/pt/documents/mapa-da-violencia-2015-homicidio-mulheres-no-brasil>

dealt with by justice systems. (...) The erroneous legal classification of crimes and the use of mitigating circumstances to reduce sentences are some of the many obstacles faced by victims and their families in their efforts to access to justice and obtain an effective response from them” (UN Women, 2014).

Data from the other two countries investigated in this project, Portugal and the United Kingdom, are no more encouraging. In Portugal there is no national survey on violence against women specifically in universities. But the Community of Portuguese Speaking Countries (CPLP) defined, in 2010, a Strategic Plan for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, which establishes international agreements and cooperation to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. The plan also provides for civil society organizations to implement gender equality and equity policies. The document proposes that institutions are entitled: “To identify and combat the various situations of sexism that are manifested in educational establishments, as well as to react to discrimination and to help students and teachers identify them” (CPLP, 2010, p. 61).

The question is, nine years later, can this resolution be felt in practice in universities? Judging from the recent survey, made by the Women's Alternative and Response Union (UMAR), unit of Coimbra, the answer is; not yet. The data from a questionnaire answered by 407 women between June and July, 2017 are still being computed and the UMAR researchers informed me in an interview that more than 90% of them reported that they have suffered some kind of harassment in the universitarian environment in Coimbra.

In the United Kingdom, the National Student Union conducted a survey in 2010 that points out: “One in seven female university students has experienced a serious physical or sexual assault during their time as a student” (NUS, Hidden Marks Survey, 2010). It is known, however, that many survivors of sexual violence do not feel comfortable addressing the subject, and therefore, by refusing to participate in surveys like these, data can hide an even more terrifying reality.

Everyday Sexism

British feminist Laura Bates created the “Everyday Sexism” website in 2012 to collect stories of women about the daily harassment they suffered. Expecting without much conviction about 50 comments, she was surprised, in a few weeks, with an inconceivable amount of cases narrated by women of diverse countries. The project had repercussions in the press, in the British society and in the world. Three years after it began, it stored more than 100,000 reports. Laura became a reference in the struggle for gender equality and, in 2014, published the book on the stories of so many women. Among them, young university students:

“It’s March 2013. I’m standing in a lecture hall at Cardiff University and something is horribly wrong. In front of me a sea of hands. I’m speaking to a group of about 100 students, most of them Young women. I’ve just asked them who among them has been sexually assaulted. Almost every hand in the room is raised” (Bates, 2014, p. 121).

Bates stresses that this is a topic that deserves attention and specific research because universities are set in a particularly hostile, and often misogynist, environment for women.

It was only in the year 2015 that the UK hosted the first conference on sexual harassment in higher education. From that meeting was born *The 1752 Group*, an independent organization that brings together researchers and student unions to investigate the sexual misconduct of university employees.

In 2018, *Group 1752* conducted interviews with 16 female undergraduate, masters and doctoral students from 14 UK institutions on staff behavior. The report does not cite which universities the respondents belonged to, but points out the lack of effective strategies to support those who report harassment and sexual violence, and more than that, mostly, there is an attempt to dissuade the student from reporting⁵.

In this sense, the University of Warwick, located in Coventry, UK, seeks to move in the opposite direction of the failure raised by the work of the *1752 Group*. The sector responsible for implementing a policy of respect, combating sexual violence, intolerance, racism, hate crimes and related crimes - Wellbeing Support Services -, has developed a series of training programs for students and staff to implement the protocols for care and support services for survivors of violence.

“You are not alone. We are here for you”—are sentences printed on the material distributed to all students entering Warwick University, with information aimed to offer some guidance about harassment and sexual violence as well as to provide contacts for support in cases of violence.

However, contrary to this policy of respect, 11 young men students at the University of Warwick staged in 2018 what became known as the “scandal of group chat”. In an exchange of messages on their social networks, the group campaigned against women, announcing that they deserved to be raped.

⁵ See the work of the 1752 Group here: <https://1752group.com/>



[Photo: Fafate Costa. Students protest at University of Warwick (UK). Feb, 2019]

The students were denounced, went through an internal trial of the University, and were banned for ten years. But two of them appealed this decision and managed to reverse the punishment for a year's time. Faced with the possible return of men accused of incitement to rape, students at the University of Warwick organized a series of protests, saying that academic permissiveness in this case was shameful, and then Warwick did not protect their women.

Multiple Voices, One Story

“One point to be discussed is that statistics show how many women were abused, harassed, raped on *campus*. But we must change this narrative, because it is assumed that universities are students, teachers and officials who perpetrate this violence. And they're still there”. (Testimony in the United Kingdom)

“Our presence and our voice in the university are very conditioned by its own hierarchical, elitist and extremely patriarchal environment. To maintain their privileges, teachers compact with authoritarian, retrograde and almost medieval practices against women”. (Testimony in Portugal)

“Our main challenge is to break the silencing structure. We women are taught to accept the oppressions that we live, and in the university even more, right, that is a space of hierarchy where women go through many difficulties due to patriarchy

and sexism. First, the university needs to recognize the violence that occurs here, because it has been denied”. (Testimony in Brazil)



[Photo: Gaby Pereira. “You are not Alone”. Students protest at Rural University. May, 2016]

The three testimonials above were granted by female university students to this researcher, collected through “snowball sampling”, in which one participant identifies others to collaborate with the project. Here is the link to the first trailer of the documentary in production, with the interviews made in Brazil :

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZb9z_mcBzs&t=15s

It is known that addressing such acute issues for women as sexual violence and a range of other gender inequalities is not a simple task. These situations are almost always silenced by the pain they cause in survivors. However, when a woman speaks, she generates the feeling of sisterhood and another woman recognizes herself, feels that she is not alone. In this documentary there are voices and faces representing thousands of other voices and faces. Recording spontaneously about their experiences in academic circles, they say: “Sexists will not pass. They've shut us up for too long”.

What can be acknowledged so far is that if we women are connected in different parts of the world by the violence that we suffer, we must urgently unite to rewrite our history.

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